

THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS

Prior to the discovery of the text, the Gospel of Thomas was known from a number of references in the literature of the church fathers:

- (1) Hippolytus (c 230 CE) quotes a saying which he says is "in the gospel according to Thomas"
- (2) Origen (c 233 CE), in his homily on Luke 1, mentions "the gospel of Thomas" which he refers to as a "presumptuous composition"
- (3) Eusebius (c 323 CE) in his Church History includes the book amongst the list of "fabrications by heretics"
- (4) Cyril of Jerusalem (c 345 CE) says it is a book composed by the Manicheans and that it was written by Thomas, one of the wicked disciples of Mani.

Three fragments of the text in Greek found at Oxyrhynchus in Egypt were published in the late 19th century and early in the 20th century. These were not recognised as belonging to the Gospel of Thomas until the complete text of a version in Coptic was discovered in the Nag Hammadi texts (found in 1945).

The Greek fragments and their approximate dates are¹:

- P Oxy 1 (c 200 CE)² - containing sayings 26-29, 30 and 77
- P Oxy 654 (250-300 CE)³ - containing sayings 1-7
- P Oxy 655 (c 250 CE)⁴ - containing sayings 24, 36-39.

The version of the full gospel in Coptic found in Nag Hammadi Codex II dates to approximately 340 CE⁵. This codex also contained several unquestionably Gnostic works (the Gospel of Philip, the Hypostasis of the Archons, on the Origin of the World, the Expository Treatise on the Soul and the Book of Thomas the Contender Writing to the Perfect).

Having been found as part of what is clearly a library of Gnostic texts, the Gospel of Thomas was originally held by many scholars to be a Gnostic work. It is therefore important to consider first what the term Gnostic means. In what was one of the first commentaries

¹ Further details of the Greek manuscripts, including photographs, may be found in Larry Hurtado *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: manuscripts and Christian origins* (Grand Rapids Michigan: Eerdmanns, 2006)

² This is from a codex. It has abbreviated *nomina sacra* as in most Christian manuscripts, in this case ΙΣ (Jesus), ΘΥ (God), ΠΑΡ (father) and ΑΝΩΝ (man). Its handwriting has been classified as "reformed documentary".

³ This is an opisphograph (the recto containing a land survey). It is written in a cursive hand. It has a three times occurring *nomina sacra* (ΙΗΣ = Jesus).

⁴ This is from a roll. Its script has been referred to as "informal book hand". In this part of the text there are no *nomina sacra*.

⁵ Although written in Sahidic Coptic, the gospel contains many Greek words on every page. *Nomina sacra* (which are always Greek loan words in this text) are written in abbreviated form in all cases just as in Christian Greek manuscripts.

published on the Gospel of Thomas, Grant and Freedman defined the central concept of Gnosticism being:

There is a redeemer from heaven; he gives, to those who are "by nature" capable of salvation, the knowledge which *is* salvation. The Gnostic knows who he is (a spiritual being), whence he has fallen, and whither he will return⁶.

Gnosticism comes from the Greek word for "knowledge", γνῶσις (gnosis). According to this "knowledge":

human beings have a slumbering heavenly nucleus in them which comes from the most high God. However, they have forgotten this original heavenly origin of part of their inner being. During life on earth it is important to become conscious of it again and thus, through the true gnosis, to restore contact with the divine. In this way, human beings who are open to gnosis can find the way back on high⁷.

Now Gnosticism gets a lot more complicated than this and another central characteristic of many Gnostic systems is that it does not believe the creator of this imperfect world to be anything other than a lesser divine being: ie the creator of the world is himself a created being. The path back to the high God, above the creator of the world, is difficult and complicated and involves much hidden knowledge, ie knowledge only held by other Gnostics.

However, unlike incontrovertibly Gnostic texts such as the Gospel of Judas, matters are more complex with the Gospel of Thomas. Although the gospel was initially widely accepted by the scholarly world as being a Gnostic work, it does not contain any of the elaborate hierarchies of divine beings or have many immediately obvious esoteric paraphernalia so apparent in many of the other Nag Hammadi texts. This has led to some questioning as to whether it is Gnostic at all. On the other hand, it is only fair to mention that some have questioned the usefulness of the whole concept of Gnosticism⁸! Before coming to the question of Thomas and Gnosticism, it is appropriate first all to characterise the contents of the work.

Translations divide the text of Thomas have into 114 sayings (logia). There is no numbering in the Greek and Coptic manuscripts although P Oxy 654 contains horizontal strokes at the left margins to separate the sayings in this papyrus fragment (which consists of Sayings 1-7).

Compared with the large quantity of manuscripts of early date which have survived of most of the canonical texts, it is a considerable disadvantage to have only one complete manuscript for Thomas. Although the Greek fragments clearly belong to the same work, there are significant differences in wording and, in P Oxy 1, Saying 77 follows Saying 30. This indicates that the order of sayings was not necessarily fixed. The saying quoted from Thomas by Hippolytus, raises other issues. He quotes what appears to be Saying 4 but in the form:

⁶ R M Grant & D N Freedman *The Secret Sayings of Jesus* (London: Collins, 1960), p 62.

⁷ R Roukema *Gnosis and Faith in Early Christianity* (London: SCM, 1999) p 3.

⁸ See, for example, Michael Allen Williams *Rethinking "Gnosticism": an argument for dismantling a dubious category* (Princeton: PUP, 1996).

The one who seeks me will find me in children from seven years of age and onwards. For there, hiding in the fourteenth aeon, I am revealed⁹.

This is clearly a more classically Gnostic version of the text and raises a number of uncertainties. Is this simply Hippolytus quoting inaccurately from memory¹⁰, is it Hippolytus deliberately distorting a text used by a group of which he disapproves, or did Thomas exist in an alternative form very different from the four manuscript survivals? The Coptic version has its own problems, eg why are two pages left blank after the first part of Saying 95? What is missing from the end of Saying 93? What are the missing words from Saying 101? Why does the question the disciples ask in Saying 6 appear to have its answer delayed until Saying 14?

The gospel has the following characteristics:

- (1) Unlike the canonical gospels, it contains no narrative and consists of a series of sayings (logia), in the vast majority of cases introduced by the phrase "Jesus said"¹¹.
- (2) Some of those sayings parallel those in the Synoptic Gospels. It mentions the following people: Jesus, Thomas, Mary, John the Baptist, James the Just, Simon Peter, Matthew, Salome, "a Samaritan", the disciples, Pharisees and scribes and it is set in Judea – so this is a cast of characters familiar from the canonical gospels and set in the same place as the Synoptics.
- (3) Although there is some "question and answer" material, there is no sustained dialogue.
- (4) The book's theology is Christologically undeveloped. It may contain one title for Jesus, viz: Son (Saying 44). However, there is some doubt as to whether or not it is intended to be titular.
- (5) The parables in the book appear to be single point style parables, ie there is no indication that they are intended to be interpreted allegorically.
- (6) In its opening sentence it may indicate that it purports to contain the sayings of the risen Jesus¹².
- (7) It mentions one Old Testament figure, viz: Adam¹³. However, it does not seem to refer back directly to the Old Testament, eg it is difficult to tell if the author is aware that Saying 66 is based on Psalm 118 (see below).

⁹ Quoted on p103 of Bentley Layton (editor) *Nag Hammadi Codex II.2-7 Volume One* (Leiden: Brill 1989).

¹⁰ On the general issue of the difficulties of patristic citation see Michael J Kruger *Early Christian Attitudes towards the Reproduction of Texts* in Charles E Hill and Michael J Kruger (editors) *The Early Text of the New Testament* (Oxford: OUP, 2012) pp 63-80.

¹¹ P Oxy 1, P Oxy 654 and P Oxy 655 all appear to read the present tense "Jesus says".

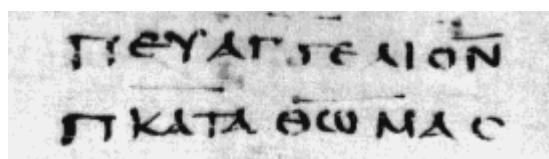
¹² It all depends on the significance of the word "living" in that first sentence. It could be that the genre is intended to be something like the Apocryphon of James which largely consist of a dialogue between the risen Jesus and James and Peter.

¹³ Sayings 46, 85 and 106.

(8) Some of the material seems self-contradictory, eg should you fast? According to Saying 14 no, but perhaps according to Saying 27 you should.

(9) As noted above, the Greek fragments from Oxyrhynchus show that at some stage in its transmission the order of some of the sayings was different and the wording in the Greek versions is not always the same as the Coptic. This indicates that, like the books of the New Testament, it had a complex textual history.

I have referred to the book as a gospel and that is its self designation. At the end of the text Nag Hammadi Codex II we find the follow colophon:



πευαγγελιον	the gospel
πκατα θωμας	according to Thomas

One of the elements in the work which signals that it may be Gnostic is its opening:

These are the hidden words that the living Jesus spoke and Didymus Judas Thomas recorded. 1 And he said, "Whoever discovers the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death."

Both the use word "hidden" and the fact that the discovery of the interpretation of the sayings means death will be avoided looks very close to the concept that knowledge of one's true state as the vessel for a "slumbering heavenly nucleus" (to use the phrase of Roukema quoted above) leads to salvation. As such we are very much in Gnostic territory. Similarly this could also apply to sayings such as the following:

Saying 3: Jesus said, "If your leaders say to you, 'Look, the (Father's) kingdom is in the sky,' then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, 'It is in the sea,' then the fish will precede you. Rather, the kingdom is within you and it is outside you. When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand that you are children of the living Father. But if you do not know yourselves, then you live in poverty, and you are the poverty."

Saying 18: The disciples said to Jesus, "Tell us, how will our end come?" Jesus said, "Have you found the beginning, then, that you are looking for the end? You see, the end will be where the beginning is. Blessed is the one who stands at the beginning: that one will know the end and will not taste death."

At the same time, these sayings could be interpreted in ways much closer to concepts in the canonical New Testament. It is undoubtedly true that the gospel contains much language which is similar to the canonical gospels and in some cases parallels it. So, for example:

Saying 9: Jesus said, Look, the sower went out, took a handful (of seeds), and scattered (them). Some fell on the road, and the birds came and gathered them. Others fell on rock, and they did not take root in the soil and didn't produce heads of grain. Others fell on thorns, and they choked the seeds and worms ate them. And others fell on good soil, and it produced a good crop: it yielded sixty per measure and one hundred twenty per measure.

This is clearly the same basic parable told in Mark 4:1-9 (and parallels). Compared with Mark's version it is very sparsely told and gives little indication it should be interpreted allegorically.

Another parable known from the synoptic gospel triple tradition¹⁴ is also paralleled in Thomas:

Saying 65: He said, A [...] person owned a vineyard and rented it to some farmers, so they could work it and he could collect its crop from them. He sent his slave so the farmers would give him the vineyard's crop. They grabbed him, beat him, and almost killed him, and the slave returned and told his master. His master said, "Perhaps he didn't know them." He sent another slave, and the farmers beat that one as well. Then the master sent his son and said, "Perhaps they will show my son some respect." Because the farmers knew that he was the heir to the vineyard, they grabbed him and killed him. Anyone here with two ears had better listen!

Saying 66: Jesus said, "Show me the stone that the builders rejected: that is the keystone."

This parable comes in Mark 12:1-12 (and parallels). As early as 1963, the German scholar Joachim Jeremias¹⁵ argued that Thomas contained an independent tradition and was not dependent upon the synoptic gospels. He went even further and suggested that, in some cases, Thomas' version was the most primitive, ie closest to the actual words of Jesus. I think this approach is fundamentally misguided and a primary piece of evidence for this view is the linking of Saying 66 to the parable. In Mark the parable is followed by the saying of Jesus:

Mark 12:10-11 ¹⁰ Have you not read this scripture: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; ¹¹ this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes'?"

Few scholars would regard this saying as anything other than the importation of a text of scripture (from Psalm 118:22) based on the early church's reflection upon the parable. Thomas also linking the saying, but showing no awareness that it is a quotation, gives a strong clue that the author has derived it from the synoptic tradition not from an independent source.

However, there are parables in the gospel which do not come from a canonical source:

Saying 97: Jesus said, The [Father's] kingdom is like a woman who was carrying a [jar] full of meal. While she was walking along [a] distant road, the handle of the jar broke and the meal spilled behind her [along] the road. She didn't know it; she hadn't noticed a problem. When she reached her house, she put the jar down and discovered that it was empty.

There are also sayings which are strangely in tune with some modern spiritualities, such as:

Saying 77: Jesus said, "I am the light that is over all things. I am all: from me all came forth, and to me all attained. Split a piece of wood; I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there."

¹⁴ See C E Carlston *The Parables of the Triple Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

¹⁵ J Jeremias *The Parables of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1963).

There was a presumption among many scholars that Thomas was originally written in Greek -especially since the earliest surviving fragments were in this language. However, there have been advocates for the view that Coptic was the original language. More recently a substantial case has been made for Syriac being the language of composition and, as confirmation of this, finds the work indebted to Tatian's Diatessaron as major source.¹⁶ In my view, all previous theories have been superseded by Simon Gathercole's detailed demonstration that the language of composition was Greek¹⁷. Further he makes a substantial case for believing that Thomas made use of books of what became the canonical New Testament, and in particular the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Independently Mark Goodacre has, in my view, put this matter beyond reasonable doubt in demonstrating that Thomas could not have simply shared a common oral source with the canonical gospels but shows specific knowledge of the redactional elements of Matthew and Luke¹⁸.

In 1993, the Jesus Seminar¹⁹ published a book²⁰ in which each saying in the gospels is colour coded according to how accurately or not they represent the words of Jesus. Particularly controversial was the fact that the gospels used as source material were the four canonical gospels plus Thomas²¹. Concerning the Jesus Seminar, Pokorný writes:

According to them eschatological enthusiasm is a post-Easter phenomenon influenced by Jewish apocalyptic. This could mean that the *Gospel of Thomas* not only as to its genre but also theologically may be nearer to Jesus than the Synoptics. Jesus was considered to be a teacher of wisdom of a Stoic or Cynic kind for whom the kingdom of God was the model of the ideal society: the apocalyptic orientation was introduced into his heritage after Easter and was developed by Paul of Tarsus²².

This is largely the approach Dominic Crossan adopts in his use of Thomas in his important work on the historical Jesus²³. Indeed, what is probably a majority of North American scholars, regard the Gospel of Thomas as being, at least in its initial form, very early in Christian history, ie prior to the composition of the canonical gospels. They also regard it, in terms of genre, as being analogous to Q (one of the putative sources of Matthew and Luke). Indeed it has occasionally been seen as a vindication of the idea that a work such as Q existed²⁴.

¹⁶ See Nicholas Perrin *Thomas and Tatian: the relationship between the Gospel of Thomas and the Diatessaron* (Atlanta: SBL 2002). Perrin summarises his conclusions in more popular format in *Thomas, the other gospel* (London: SPCK 2007).

¹⁷ See Simon Gathercole *The Composition of the Gospel of Thomas: original language and influence* (New York: CUP 2012).

¹⁸ See Mark Goodacre *Thomas and the Gospels: the making of an apocryphal text* (London: SPCK, 2012).

¹⁹ See appended note on the Jesus Seminar at the end of this paper.

²⁰ Robert W Funk, Roy W Hoover and the Jesus Seminar *The Five Gospels: the search for the authentic words of Jesus* (New York: Polebridge, 1993).

²¹ While it is the case that the vast majority of the passages coded red (ie close to what Jesus actually said) there are examples of red-coding unique to Thomas (eg Saying 41).

²² Petr Pokorný *A Commentary on the Gospel of Thomas: from interpretations to the interpreted* (London: T&T Clark, 2009).

²³ J D Crossan *The Historical Jesus: the life of a Mediterranean Jewish peasant* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991).

²⁴ Coming from a rather different approach, April DeConick has attempted to demonstrate in considerable detail that the core of Thomas precedes the canonical texts and was originally composed in Aramaic - see *Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas: a history of the gospel and its growth* (London: T&T Clark, 2005).

European scholars, including those from the UK, have not been convinced by these arguments. They point to the absence of any evidence whatsoever that Thomas existed as a text in the first century and draw analogies between Thomas and various second century works. Clearly Goodacre and Gathercole date Thomas in the second century since they believe they have demonstrated the use by Thomas of the canonical texts.

Writing in 1990, Helmut Koester wrote that there was "seemingly no rhyme or reason for the odd sequence in which the sayings appear²⁵" in Thomas. He goes on to describe the writer as:

not an author who deliberately composed his book according to a general master plan. He is rather a collector and compiler who used a number of smaller units of collected sayings, some perhaps available in written form, and composed them randomly²⁶.

It is hard to feel that subsequent research has made much progress with this. While Perrin postulated a whole series of catchwords, including 502 in his own Syriac retroversion (compared with 269 in the Coptic version and 263 in the Greek retroversion), his definition of catchword was undoubtedly too broad, ie any word which can semantically, etymologically, or phonologically be associated with another word found in an adjacent saying. It is hard to feel that Perrin's "findings" have actually shed much light on the text.

If there is no identifiable logic to the order of sayings and if the work is not Gnostic, are there any other suggestions for where to locate Thomas:

(a) From soon after its initial publication, the similarity between Thomas and wisdom texts such as the Wisdom of Solomon (from the Septuagint) and the Pirke Aboth from the Mishnah has been noted. The most detailed elaboration of the concept of Thomas as a wisdom book is by Stevan Davies²⁷ and his work has found wide acceptance even amongst those who hold very different views about the date of composition and its relationship with the canonical new testament texts.

(b) Another focus of study has been the relationship between Thomas and John's Gospel. It was first suggested by Gregory Riley²⁸ that the Gospel of Thomas refutes the idea of the bodily resurrection of Jesus and the eschatological bodily resurrection of believers. John strongly asserts bodily resurrection and portrays the disciple in a negative light. Similarly Elaine Pagels²⁹ sees the communities in which Thomas and John lived as being involved in disputes over the person and message of Jesus.

(c) I mentioned above that the Jesus Seminar regarded Thomas as effectively a sayings collection. This is very much the approach Stephen Patterson takes³⁰. Even if you do not believe Q existed, it is clear that the sayings of Jesus were remembered within the early

²⁵ Helmut Koester *Ancient Christian Gospels* (London: SCM, 1990) p 81.

²⁶ *Ibid* pp 80-81.

²⁷ Stevan Davies *The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Wisdom* (2nd ed Dublin: Bardic Press 2005).

²⁸ See Gregory J Riley *Resurrection Reconsidered: John and Thomas in controversy* (Minneapolis: Fortress 1995).

²⁹ Elaine Pagels *Beyond Belief: the secret gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2003).

³⁰ In Stephen J Patterson *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus* (Sonoma CA: Polebridge 1992).

church and Paul clearly had access to such material (see I Corinthians 7.10-12 where Paul clearly distinguishes knows Jesus' "command" on a particular subject and distinguished it from his own advice³¹. However, knowing that sayings were preserved does not automatically entail they were put into a document, ie that there was a sayings literature before there was a gospel literature.

(d) Richard Valantasis³² suggests that Thomas should be located within the ascetical tradition of Syrian Christianity (represented by Encratite Christians such as Tatian and Marcion). He is open to the idea it may also Gnostic at the same time since he does not believe these are exclusive designations.

(e) As well as studying the relationship with wisdom literature, Stevan Davies also made a much more speculative suggestion in a paper he presented at an SBL meeting in 1994³³. Working from the insight that the meaning of Thomas is not to be found from reading it, he suggests that Thomas might be list of oracles to be used in divination. In this a person's questions are answered by randomly picking one from a set of statements.

It may initially cause surprise that scholars have taken such diverse views of the text of Thomas. As Davies remarks:

Consideration of my own essays, and those of others, leads me to believe that we are like the blind men who encounter an elephant. One holds the tail and finds it to be like a snake, one holds an ear and finds it to be like a rug, and so forth. H. Bloom and I look at sayings 3, 18, 91, 113 etc. and find Thomas powerfully to affirm the presence of the divine and of the kingdom in this world now, a presence that has been the case since the primordial beginning; we look at sayings 14 and 104 and find an attack on ascetic practices. S. Patterson, H. Koester, and others look at sayings 37, 49, 50, 56, 110, etc., and find that Thomas condemns the world, encourages a future ascent to another realm above, and requires ascetic practices. When I interpret their sayings in light of mine, I think they have failed to understand Thomas at all. And, of course, vice versa³⁴.

Even a brief acquaintance allows insight into how unspecific much of Thomas is, eg if you approach it believing it is a Gnostic text then it is easy to see Gnosticism in it.³⁵ On the other hand another set of presuppositions would deliver a completely different interpretation. The most thorough-going attempt to avoid the pitfalls of presupposition is Valantasis' commentary³⁶ which attempts to interpret Thomas strictly within its own text world. However, Saying 1 may be taken as a warning that interpreting the text may not be a simple and straightforward exercise given the reward offered the successful interpreter³⁷.

The date of composition is very much relevant to any approach at interpretation. An example of the difficulty is how to translate the Greek loan word μοναχός in Sayings 16, 49

³¹ Τοῖς δὲ γεγαμηκόσιν παραγγέλλω, οὐκ ἐγὼ ἀλλὰ ὁ κύριος, γυναῖκα ἀπὸ ἀνδρὸς μὴ χωρισθῆναι, ἐὰν δὲ καὶ χωρισθῇ, μενέτω ἄγαμος ἢ τῷ ἀνδρὶ καταλλαγήτω, - καὶ ἄνδρα γυναῖκα μὴ ἀφιέναι. Τοῖς δὲ λοιποῖς λέγω ἐγὼ οὐχ ὁ κύριος· εἴ τις ἀδελφὸς γυναῖκα ἔχει ἄπιστον καὶ αὕτη συνευδοκεῖ οἰκεῖν μετ' αὐτοῦ, μὴ ἀφιέτω αὐτήν·

³² Richard Valantasis *The Gospel of Thomas* (London: Routledge 1999).

³³ This is reproduced as an appendix in Davies *op cit*.

³⁴ Stevan L Davies, (2010-11-19). *The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Wisdom* (Kindle Locations 4078-4079). Bardic Press. Kindle Edition.

³⁵ The classic exposition from this approach may be found in Grant and Freedman's commentary (*op cit*).

³⁶ See Valantasis *op cit*.

³⁷ "Whoever discovers the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death."

and 75. If this was a later Syrian text there would no question that the word would be translated "solitaries" (ie monks)³⁸. This is out of the question for a first century or early second century document.

In 2005, I gave a lecture on the Gospel of Thomas at Hereford Cathedral entitled *The Gospel of Thomas: new light or distorted image?* At the end of the lecture, I suggested that Thomas raised the following challenges:

- If the book is early, or if it contains a substantial amount of material that is early, then it raises the possibility that it might accurately record elements of the teaching of Jesus
- If so, this challenges the conventional view about the nature of the message of Jesus
- This would destroy the consensus which has existed since Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*
- The emergence of a new paradigm can already be seen in north American scholarship
- Alongside this, there is an increasing use of the book for spiritual reading and in being valued as a religious text.

These challenges will still remain while there is no consensus among those studying the gospel and it will be fascinating to see what the effects of the studies of Gathercole and Goodacre will be in shaping the debate.

Having tried to give some sort of overview, it is probably appropriate to set out my own conclusions about the Gospel of Thomas:

- (1) The gospel was composed in the second century, probably between 130 and 200 CE.
- (2) Among its sources were the canonical gospels of Matthew and Luke.
- (3) The gospel was composed in Greek, probably in Syria.
- (4) The work is not Gnostic but stands broadly in the wisdom tradition.
- (5) Although it was clearly well known in Christian communities, it was not widely used as a liturgical text and was most popular amongst a variety of marginal groups.
- (6) Religiously the text has a very individualised and anti-institutional focus.
- (7) No convincing case has yet been made to explain the order of the material in the gospel.
- (8) The gospel is of no value in providing information about the historical Jesus.

³⁸ The English translation is not helpful here - especially since it might be assumed that the same word was found at the end of Saying 4 where the phrase "single one" translates two Coptic words (οχα οχωτ).

Appended Note

The Jesus Seminar

The Jesus Seminar is a group of American scholars who have been meeting for over 30 years to consider the historical Jesus. As might be expected there are differences of emphasis by each person involved in the project and it would be unfair to characterise each individual scholar as signing up to every view expressed in the group's publications. However, there are some general points which might be made about the general approach the group takes:

- (1) The group seeks to identify authentic material, ie teaching and sayings which Jesus actually delivered during his lifetime and events which took place. Once these elements are identified, the group searches for the most "original" version of each saying or account.
- (2) The group looks for multiple attestation across the different streams of tradition, ie a theme is especially likely to go back to Jesus if it is found, for example, in Mark, Q, Matthew's special material, Luke's special material and in the Gospel of Thomas.
- (3) The group also makes some use of the "second quest" criterion of dissimilarity, ie a theme which is distinct from both first century Judaism and the early church is most likely to be genuine.
- (4) The group makes use of sources outside the New Testament, in particular it treats the Gospel of Thomas alongside the canonical gospels. Indeed this gospel is treated as originating in the first century and some of the material used in its composition as pre-dating the synoptic gospels.